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THE FOREIGN CHILD AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

BY

LESLIE HAYFORD

Field Secretary, North American Civic League for Immigrants



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NORTH AMERICAN CIVIC LEAGUE FOR IMMIGRANTS

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The Foreign Child and the Public School

The problem of the foreign child in the public school is the result of a revolution in industry during the past two or three generations. Cities have grown rapidly, wave on wave of immigrants has flooded into the country, filling factory and tenement house and crowding out the play spaces of the city, so that the foreign quarters have become the most congested and neglected. Manufacture—on an enormous scale—has brought the immigrant man and woman and child. Rapid industrial expansion is almost wholly responsible for the problem of the immigrant child in the school. For in the readjustment of society to the changed conditions of life—to factory labor, to crowded quarters of the city, to the loss of home life through the economic necessity of both parents to become wage-earners, to the replacement of yards and open spaces by factories and tenement houses, to the substitution of the street for the natural playground—in the readjustment of society to these new conditions the child has been forgotten and his needs neglected.

Now it is the immigrant who most inhabits the crowded sections of the city which have resulted from this industrial change. And it is the immigrant child who has suffered most from this neglect of childhood's needs. The American child has been less affected. In the main, he does not live away from light and air and play space; he is not given over to the street for the larger part of his childhood's life and training; he is not universally obliged to go to work as soon as he can get working papers; economic necessity does not relentlessly drag him out of school and cheat him out of his chance in life.

Just what is that chance in life which should belong to every child? Its bare outlines are indicated by the law of the state which requires that every child shall be in school until he has reached a certain age. That law aims, I take it, to provide every child with the advantages of a "common school" education. There could have been but one reason for enacting such a law: it must have been deemed necessary for the safety of the state that each child should have this minimum of schooling. Yet by no possibility can the immigrant child entering school at twelve or eleven or ten years of age, ill-equipped and ignorant of English, complete the common school course. Some part of the schooling which the state would have him obtain must be foregone—he hasn't time to avail himself of the full opportunity; he must earn a living. So he passes out into the world of work, pitifully uneducated and ill-equipped.

If it is a matter of principle for the state to expect every child to receive a certain amount of instruction, some provision must be made whereby the immigrant child can get his share. It is not a matter which concerns the child alone, although it concerns him most. It is of grave import to the city and the state. These children in our schools are our future citizens. Into their hands will be placed the government of city, state and nation. What kind of school opportunity is theirs now, will very largely determine what kind of citizens they become. As a matter of self-protection the state must see to it that compulsory education is not unavailing. Whatever will make the immigrant child a more efficient worker, a more cheerful liver, a more thoughtful neighbor, and a more active citizen—whatever, in short, will make him more economically and socially efficient—will tend to strengthen the state and elevate humanity. To give the immigrant child a square deal is not charity; it is statesmanship.

The immigrant child is much more dependent than the native child upon influences outside his home for his real training. In the growth of industry the home life of the factory worker has been withered and dwarfed. The child must get his training for life either from the school or from the street. To put the print

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of the school on his character is a task big enough for the most phenomenal teacher that ever entered a schoolroom. There are so many things beyond mere scholastic training that the child needs with a crying need. He needs right ideals, a true conception of life and its values, kindness toward his fellows, sanity of thought and honesty of action, a love of life and a friendliness toward life. He needs things that will help him to get on in the world and things that will make him a good citizen and neighbor.

Perhaps more than any other child, the immigrant child needs to have right ideals given him in school. For his ideals are going to have no inconsiderable influence on the attitude of his parents toward America. If he goes to the public school, what he brings home with him will be looked upon as the thought of that superior being, his teacher. To prevent the wrong ideals that the child may receive from the street, which is too largely his real field of life, from becoming the dominant ones, is a task of immeasurable difficulty. So much that is false, that is a distorted conception of life, is taught the child by the street that the utmost endeavor will be none too much to give him in school a right conception of life and its values. So much of neglect and harshness, of the cold relentlessness of life, is the lot of the immigrant child that the school must make special effort to inspire him with friendliness toward life and kindness toward his fellows—to make him *socially* efficient. In that, the attitude of the teacher is the vital factor.

Besides this moulding of character, the immigrant child needs help in becoming *economically* efficient. His brief period in school should make him better able to earn a livelihood—should help him to get and to hold that job which necessity requires him to seek. In considering the problem we must not forget that the immigrant child is required by economic necessity to go to work—to earn money—at an early age. He finds that he cannot even wait to finish the common school course. If he must leave thus early, a substitute for the traditional eight or nine grades should be provided for him. And that substitute should be of economic value to him.

But while this vocational training is essential in order that the foreign child may become an efficient worker, it is not more important than his training in character. That is the greatest good he can ever get from school. In that training the teacher becomes a maker of Americans. She can implant what is best in American ideals in the immigrant child's untutored mind and heart. Compared with this, the mere teaching of English is unimportant. The child might pick up English on the street; the forming of character cannot be trusted to "the street, the gutter and the garbage box."



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